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Harrison, Fairfax

The place of industry in  
modern life

[Washington, D.C.]

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# The Place of Industry in Modern Life

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Baccalaureate Address  
at the  
University of Georgia  
June 16, 1915

By  
FAIRFAX HARRISON  
President, Southern Railway Company

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17 Feb 1916

#### THE PLACE OF INDUSTRY IN MODERN LIFE.

At the Paris Exposition of 1855 there were honourably inscribed on the buildings the names of men who had distinguished themselves not only in science but in industry. It was deemed a fit acknowledgment of the modern world to the place which industry has taken in it. There arose, however, a powerful voice of protest, that of Ernest Renan. "The mistake lies," he said, "not in proclaiming industry to be excellent and useful, but in exalting it beyond measure and in attaching too much importance to perfecting its processes. \* \* \* The useful does not ennoble: that only ennobles which presupposes in man intellectual or moral worth. Virtue, genius, science when it is disinterested, and its only object is to satisfy the desire which leads man to penetrate the enigmas of the universe, military valour, holiness, all those things which correspond with the moral, intellectual or æsthetic needs of man, all these can ennoble. \* \* \* But what is merely useful will never ennoble. \* \* \* Industry renders immense services to society but they are services which after all are repaid in money. To every one his own reward: to the man whose usefulness is of the earth earthy, wealth, happiness in the earthly meaning of the word, all earthly blessings; to genius, to virtue, to glory—nobleness."

This is an eloquent echo of the judgment upon industry which had been entertained by the Greeks, which has persisted through the ages, which found expression in the Eighteenth Century sneer at England as a "nation of shop-keepers," which we here in the South have exemplified in the opinion surviving even to this generation in rare back-waters of inheritance that it "ill becomes a gentleman to engage in trade." With the Greeks, as with our immediate forebears, many of the manifestations of industry wore a purely servile guise and were contemned as such, but modern civilization has the added burden of medieval feudalism persisting in its prejudices. When the sole discipline of civilization was direct force the highest achievement of a man of generous birth was in feats of arms, or in that mimic of warfare, the chase, and in such a society a contempt for the slow and painful production of the necessities

of civilization was a test of breeding. It is only in the present generation that we have seen a ruling class holding to the old traditions and yet sufficiently enlightened to appreciate that defensible political power must be built on a foundation of productive efficiency even if it is to be defended by destructive energy. I refer to modern Germany. In his soul despising the tradesman and the manufacturer, the *junker* has still had the wisdom to conceal his prejudice in order to promote his own opportunity for world-power on the shoulders of a wealth-producing population. In very truth the might of modern Germany, which in demonstration has made the whole world gasp when once its ruling class reverted to force, rests like the untried but well recognized might of the United States of today, not upon a sovereignty of political acumen, not upon the wisdom of its intellectuals—make as they may their *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt*—not upon the play of artists upon the human soul, not even upon the genius of nationality, but upon the persistent unwearied accumulations of its organized artisans who are ever adding to the human store, in the field, in the mine, in the shop, or wherever else Industry flies its winding black flag.

But whatever may be the case of Germany, the United States, given over as it is to industrialism, is not consciously engaged in production merely for the sake of building power, nor even merely for the sake of money. We are a people steeped in idealism, crude as yet in the expression of it perhaps, with a strong appetite for emotional sensation maybe, but surely one who recognizes the motive force of some of our most recent acts of foreign policy must acknowledge that it was the most intense idealism which stirred the American people to go to war with Spain to "free" Cuba and thereby to assume heavy, new and undesired responsibilities; which prescribed a national standard of dealing with the still politically inept peoples of the Philippines as our ancestors demanded that the mother country should deal with the colonists of her own blood and political traditions; which treats with the partizan bandits of Mexico as though they were leaders of a free and self-governing people. These are policies which amaze

the practical statesmen of the elder world, and yet those statesmen would fain persuade themselves that our industrialism has made of us hierophants of a sordid cult of the almighty dollar. Nor do we confine our idealism to foreign relations. If we were in fact merely venal in our industrialism we would doubtless shape our internal political policy to the practical and successful support of industry and not be adding year after year to the cost of production by legislation intended to promote the interest of the employee at the expense of the employer, but which in fact, except in the case of a single important industry, results usually in imposing upon the domestic consumer the added cost of our social service. If the consumer is not himself an employee he must be an idealist to assume without protest the additional cost of living which is involved in paying more for what one needs than it would cost if one was not of the increasing tribe of Abou ben Adhem. We are, indeed, a nation of idealists in national policy, internal as well as external.

Claiming, then, these expressions of our political policy as characteristic of our genius as a people, it is not too much to ask those who have not had contact with the actual leaders of American industry, nor first-hand appreciation of their motives and their problems to accept as a fact that many of those men have in aspiration spiritual as well as sordid rewards and that their energy finds what is perhaps its most positive and satisfying expression in attaining that ideal of Industry which has ever been one of the chief ends of civilization, to wit: the conquest of Nature, bending her neck to the uses of man. In such a place as this in which I now stand it may fortify this assertion that I am able to say that I have seldom associated with an American of the true breed engaged in industry who has not been capable of thrilling to the prophecy of his own experience in the great chorus in the *Antigone*, which limns a deathless picture of the daring and moral victory of man in his contest with Nature.

It is not necessary to rehearse to a generation which has just witnessed the extension of the human voice across a continent the things which American industry has conceived and accomplished for civiliza-

tion. The future archeologist, coming upon the foundations of long extinct by-product plants and once noisy railway terminals which had been exterminated by some mysterious and forgotten economic catastrophe, may remark, as Darwin did of the geological traces of the animal monsters which once swarmed in America, that, if Buffon had known of the lost Pachydermata of this continent, he might have said with a greater semblance of truth that the creative force of America had lost its power rather than that it had never possessed great vigor.

Industry is, then, not necessarily mere money grubbing. With all its stimulus to selfishness and for all that it has grown out of that system of individualism which our ancestors lauded and some among us are now beginning to apologize for, industry is daily becoming more responsive to those moral and intellectual needs of man which Renan admits are ennobling. Men who conduct the destinies of great and conspicuous industries, which affect the public interest immediately, are no longer cynical of their responsibilities. More and more they recognize that they are subject to the control of public opinion almost as much as if they held public political office; that they must account for their stewardship not merely in the private chamber of a Board of Directors, but before the bar of the world. No private interest can today long sustain such men in their positions of power if once public opinion shall discover and proclaim that they lack character; and they know it. While the awakened public consciousness of a general interest in the conduct of our most important industries, and the measures of prohibition and police in which that public consciousness has found expression, have undoubtedly stimulated the changes which have taken place in the attitude of industry itself, it is fair to recognize that industrial leaders have themselves felt the stirring of the times and in notable instances have made contributions to the solution of the problems which still overshadow all industry, namely: those of the relations of labour and capital, and of the private ownership of public utilities. Such things have been done as to justify for those men the claim of statesmanship. In making this claim one need not be ashamed to admit that Industry has not yet submitted to all the

mollifying influences of the professional social democrats. It has frankly and openly combated, as inimical to efficiency, the growth of an opinion that all power except political power is a menace. This opinion is the child of fat years of plenty and prosperity. Goethe knew the sentiment which is back of it and photographed it subtly in a memorable passage of the *Dictung und Wahrheit*. "In peace," he says, "man's love of freedom becomes more and more prominent, and the more free one is the more free one wishes to be. We will not tolerate anything over us. We will not be restrained. No one shall be restrained. This tender, nay morbid, feeling gives rise to a certain moral feud which with laudable beginnings leads to inevitably unfortunate results, though at its best it appears in noble souls under the form of justice."

The modern world, realizing more personal freedom than Goethe ever dreamed of, has undoubtedly pushed this sentiment beyond the demand of justice, for, as another profound and stimulating German philosopher of our own generation has pointed out, the inclination now is not only to take up responsibility for the weaker, which is undeniably right and noble, but to place ourselves as far as possible in their position and to arrange the whole of life in their interest. "It seems to be now believed," says Eucken, "that the weak are good and the strong bad, and that it is the duty of the latter to give way to the former the moment there is a conflict of interests. This shows itself in a public tendency to take sides with the child against the parent, with the pupil against the teacher, and in general with those in subordination against those in authority, as if all order and discipline were a mere demonstration of selfishness and brutality."

It must be admitted that the recent history of industry has presented some sharp contrasts to the ideal of those who entertain this sentiment. After a long generation of surcease from serious war men have found in industry opportunities to satisfy some of the more primeval appetites, conspicuously that implanted in the breast of every virile man—the love of conflict and of power won by conquest.

Lacking heroes of military fame, we have heard men of action

who bears scars of achievement, acclaimed by the sonorous but somewhat fly-blown designation of "Captain of Industry," or, later in the suggestion of the statesman who would shape to his principles a stiff-necked and untoward generation, by a more orotund title, "Master of Competitive Supremacy." We have seen triumphant Democracy in fierce grapple with such men. We have heard their activities denounced as fraught with political and social evil, but, even when, as the result of changed standards of political philosophy, they have been convicted of statutory crimes against the common weal, all men knew that they were actuated by no merely vulgar greed but by love of work and of power, by a Berserker lust for fight, and that they usually lived their lives in action to the end, without sparing themselves to indulge in rest and sordid ostentation. Such men, though they made their careers in industry, seldom knew "happiness in the earthly meaning of the word"; they were not content with the reward of money alone, as Renan proposed, but took it and used it as the badge of their achievement. The American people saw this, and secretly admiring their Satanic wickedness have uniformly declined to submit them to degrading personal punishments, while, with that resignation human nature always has in the curbing of the haughty, they have approved the slow and certain measures of the law which painfully and in travail tear down the monuments these men set up suddenly in fierce victory. It is never displeasing to the average man to chant with David: "How are the mighty fallen!"

The sentiment of work for the sake of work and the achievements which come of work permeates the whole polity of our industrial life; it is happily as evident in the less conspicuous records of the superintendent and the resident engineer as in the red annals of the trust builder: indeed, those modest men who organize and administer working human units, whose experienced skill often devises the ways, if not the means, to accomplish the tasks of industry, are the true captains of the modern world. They are loyal soldiers of civilization deserving as much honour as ever was won upon a tented field, and yet, in the organization of society today, they are classed loosely with the politically dangerous, as servants of

incorporate Industry. Deprived of the sympathy which society gives to those under their command, deprived by the very exactions of their duties from seeking their own fortunes, earning many-fold their usually slender salaries, they are as a class as honest as their lives are simple, ever ready to do and dare without conscious stint, attesting daily in their pride of accomplishment a mute answer to Hamlet's question: "Who would fardels bear?" and realizing honourably in their response to the calls of their superiors Ruskin's fine invocation of their class:

"To obey another man, to labour for him, yield reverence to him and to his place, is not slavery. It is often the best kind of liberty, liberty from care. The man who says to one, Go, and he goeth, and to another, Come, and he cometh, has in most cases more sense of restraint and difficulty than the man who obeys him. The movements of the one are hindered by the burden on his shoulder, of the other by the bridle on his lips: there is no way by which the burden may be lightened, but we need not suffer from the bridle if we do not chafe at it. To yield reverence to another, to hold ourselves and our likes at his disposal, is not slavery: often it is the noblest state in which a man can live in this world."

Let this, then, be the answer to Ernest Renan.

Industry in the sense I have used the word, connoting organized productive labour, is one of the enlarging concepts of the modern world. It is so new a thing that it finds no definition in Dr. Johnson's dictionary. Mr. Jefferson had in his old age a vision of it. He saw more that it was inevitable than in his opinion desirable. While he never altogether yielded his darling theory that the United States should in its own interest remain a purely agricultural nation, aloof from the competitive commerce of the world—that tenet which had drawn upon him throughout his career the hatred and recrimination of New England—yet in 1816 he confessed that experience had taught him that domestic manufactures were necessary to happiness and comfort.

The fact is that industrialism began, long before it had a name, with

the decay of direct force as the basis of social discipline and the substitution of the granting or refusal of work as the main preventive and coercive power of civilization. This was an extraordinary, an almost incomprehensible change. Well may Comte exclaim that "considering the natural indolence of the human constitution, it could hardly have been foreseen that the prevailing desire of the majority of free men would be for permanent work."

With Comte's statement of the phenomenon we may accept also his explanation. "Industrial pursuit," he says, "is suitable to the intellectual mediocrity of the vast majority of the race which can best deal with clear, concrete, limited questions requiring steady but easy attention, admitting of a direct or proximate solution, relating to the practical interests of civilized life and bringing after them a pretty certain reward of ease and independence in return for sense and industry."

We have here, then, an appreciation that industry in the modern sense was not a concept of statesmanship but arose from below, and this fact, coupled with the prejudice of the cavalier class against participation in all productive labour to which I have referred, may serve to explain why until very recently industry, having become the great force of the modern world, has drawn into its ranks so few educated men, why college training has so seldom been deemed a propædæutic for industry. The typical successful American engaged in industry has been the self-made man, educated, as he proudly tells you, in the school of experience, and the majority of the shining exemplars are so today. All honour is due them and is paid to them for that reason: but their example, leading many to the belief that education is not necessary for business, had an undue influence upon their generation. This largely accounts for the passing of the roundly educated man which has been one of the regrettable facts of recent American social history, like that of our vanishing wild life.

Unless one is prepared to claim that a college education is a handicap in industry: that the needed equipment for dealing with the largest social and economic questions of the day is a mere blend of

empiricism and native common sense, then the time has certainly come when more young men of tradition and broad education are needed in industry, to be preparing to take the leadership in the next generation, when the moral responsibilities of such leadership are certain to be greater even than they are today.

Happily one may now say that the movement for the conservation of educated men in business has almost become a tendency. Already one sees every year more and more young men of the class to which I refer seeking a career in industry. It began with the demand for men trained in Science. The editor of the English periodical *Nature* truly said the other day that "Science is the dynamic and creative force in industry, and it is only through scientific discovery that industry can rapidly advance." The man engaged in industry who could underrate his debt to science would, like Sydney Smith's friend, "speak disrespectfully of the Equator." Especially do I lay the tribute of my profound admiration and grateful respect at the feet of him who makes a career in the domain of pure science. Even though from the very nature of his work the scientist can not often be one of an active industrial staff which must struggle and compete in the hurly burly, yet the actual and potential value of the scientist's contribution to industry is greater than has ever yet been generally acknowledged in America. As to what this contribution is, it will suffice to cite the justly proud claim recently put forward on behalf of the chemists, that chemical control of manufacturing practice has given the assurance of stability to thirteen great American industries which together employ eight per cent of all the wage earners engaged in manufacturing in the United States. The proof of this statement is a monument of patriotism, *aere perennius*.

It must, however, be stated that many of the men who are now trained in technical science for the uses of industry come into action with but a narrow vision, the result of over-specialization and an apparent atrophy of the power of effective generalization. My point can perhaps best be suggested by calling attention to the fact that proportionately



few of the thousands of men who now for almost a generation have gone forth from our colleges into the world with a special equipment in technical science have attained to supreme leadership in industry, though many of them are employed in industry in subordinate capacities. In making this statement I am not unmindful of the conspicuous exceptions, chiefly in the ranks of the engineers and metallurgists. The immediate advantage of a special equipment is great in that it enables a man to arrive at economic independence earlier than his untrained fellows, but I sometimes question whether he does not pay too high a price for that desideratum, and whether the lack of a broader training in such men does not deprive the country of some potential leaders in industry. We need such men as we get, they do their assigned work honestly and efficiently, but we need more the qualities of leadership which are more generally bred by what is called cultural education.

It must be recognized also that the influence of cultural education as we have had it has not yet been directly favourable to industry, though, as I shall attempt to show, it is indirectly favourable. The colleges of a generation ago still shut out the bright light of social evolution from their cloisters. They held that learning was valuable in itself and not necessarily in proportion as one could make use of it. Without pausing to discuss the fact that in the revolution of this opinion it is now proposed that the learning imparted in the colleges shall consist entirely of the vocationally useful, so that we are threatened with a new educational opinion fraught with as much exaggeration as was the old (illustrating the working of that despotism which John Stuart Mill feared in all proposals for general State education as a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another), I pass on to the effect of the old scholasticism upon the youth of today, which I believe is turning more and more of our most desirable young men towards an industrial career. I venture to adopt here a lucid statement by a modern English scholar, and an eminent classical scholar at that :

"It is against preponderant intellectualism with its attendant egotism that the present generation instinctively reacts. Amazingly clever though it is, it has felt itself somewhat sterile in motive power. It desires to feel afresh, even that it may think anew. It asks to be born again. I do not know whether I am singular in my experience, but what has most impressed me in the young is their extreme old age, their hoary wisdom. The youth of the past was in love with ideas, drunk with ideals, avid of analysis: the youth of today sees life steadily and sees it whole. Above all it craves for action and only for such thinking as is immediately translatable into action."

It is in truth action which the youth of today craves. As he comes out of college, where can he find action? Not, like Gibbon, in past history, but in making history. The tradition of the young Southern man has always suggested politics as the highest expression of intelligent action. From the day when every man who could wear spurs was a soldier until we enter the latest world, the premier place in a gentleman's ambition has been supremacy in the artistry of political government, but with the realization of democracy we have seen that ambition decay in many generous breasts, though, due to our peculiar civilization, it has persisted longest with the Southern man. Under democracy the politician exercises only the forms of power. He may grimace his own emotions but it must be behind a mask of convention, like a Greek player. Time was when the productive population was the slave of the political governor; time is when the politician has become the slave of the great god Demos; the positions are reversed; the Industrial Revolution has shifted the roles of Caliban and Ariel. Lacking politics, the trend of the college environment has been toward the traditional careers in the so-called learned professions. The greatest of these, measured by its attraction, the law, has held its place by adapting itself to changed conditions: it is honoured as it always was, but the lawyer labours now in the service not of princes and of governors, but to guide through pathless forests the policy of incarnate Industry. It is coming to pass that a youth looking out on life sees this and determines, if he may have the election, he would rather be the man who does things than the man who advises the

man who does things, and that is the election for industry in preference to the law.

Such men are welcome in industry and when they have the qualifications for success may count on such success as is attainable in industry today. They may not expect a primrose path. The apprenticeship is long, exacting and frugal, and in the present state of public opinion with respect to corporate enterprise, diligence, like that of the Good Apprentice in Hogarth's pictures, is not rewarded by the assurance of ultimate affluence and universal respect. If they want to make a fortune these men had better turn at once to selling merchandise. They may not expect always to live and to work in the comfortable places of the earth. They must associate chiefly with men with whom they may have the largest human but small intellectual sympathy. As they rise to places of authority they may expect not only to have to do their duty under serious public difficulty but to have their most sincere motives misunderstood and traduced. They must be ready always to take the consequences of saying no. "Patriots," said the experienced Sir Robert Walpole, "are easily raised. I have myself raised many a one. 'Tis but to refuse an unreasonable request and up springs a patriot." They must bear heavy responsibility without sympathy and realize that failure is a crime for which good intention is seldom an acceptable excuse. They will find, as Cardinal Newman did, that men are influenced more by type of personality than by argument, however logical; that the loyalty of General Lee's army was due more to that indefinable personal attribute which makes a leader than to any thing intellectual: that Southern men can be led any where but are driven only by superior force. They will find that much of their work will be in an atmosphere of unreasoning prejudice. They will encounter much meanness in human nature and some injustice: but if they persist and hold hard to their ideals and do succeed they will know the greatest of all satisfactions, the consciousness of work well done. They will know, too, that that work has not been in the closet, has not been theoretical and indirect in its effect, but positive and part of the motive power of the age: and so, in proportion as it is sincere and en-

lightened and progressive, useful and noble in the highest sense. They will know that they have been producers, adding to the economic store of humanity, shaping directly the welfare of thousands of their fellow men who are struggling upward: that they have been leaders of society and not its mere servants who live by their wits upon the needs or the pleasures of the workers. They may not achieve the laurel crown of fame and write their names large on the enduring page of history, but they will have made the kind of friends who are made only among those with whom one has shared tribulations, dangers, triumphs and escapes. They will have few illusions, but deep convictions. They will have given the world more than they have taken from it, but they will have taken and held some thing which is supreme in the heart of man. When Alexander the Great was asked what he reserved for himself, so liberal were his gifts, he said: "Hope, that is the true inheritance of all that resolve upon great enterprises."

No one could express more convincingly the sentiment of progress, and progress is the ideal of American industry.

The place of Industry in modern life can, then, be made as honourable as it is beyond all peradventure supremely useful. It is worth the best a man can give who would serve his age and leave to his children an inspiration in his career.

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